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INDIGENOUS ISSUES

Written statement submitted by Franciscans International, a non-governmental organization in general consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[20 December 1999]

GE.00-10552 (E)

Franciscans in action: the Philippines

1. The human rights situation in the Philippines is neither widely known nor well understood. Nevertheless, violations do exist. Since the Magellan conquest, indigenous Filipino communities have struggled to survive. For centuries, communities like the Agtas, the Aitas, the Subanems and the Mamgyans have been forced to integrate, and therefore to deny their culture and heritage. In recent years, the situation has become increasingly problematic, as the indigenous are now internally displaced persons. Indigenous Filipino communities are increasingly being uprooted from their homes by miners, loggers, land grabbers and corporations. The denial of home and land strips these people of their dignity and much of what they consider sacred.

2. The indigenous people consider the earth to be the most sacred and holy of God's creations. It does not belong to the people, but to God. Humankind does not control it, but rather is controlled by it. It guides the daily activities of the indigenous people. They are born of the earth, nurture it throughout their lives, and return to it upon death. Although they contend that they have no ownership of earth, their removal from it desecrates their faith, denies them a purpose and deprives them of their ancestral domain.

3. The Franciscan Movement for Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation (FMJPIC), an Inter-Franciscan group, is greatly troubled by this situation. As it reflected on the Jubilee Celebration and its relevance to the indigenous, it decided it would be appropriate to make indigenous issues its priority during the Jubilee year. The indigenous situation speaks directly to the Jubilee, a Judeo-Christian tradition rooted in Leviticus 25 and proclaimed by Jesus in Luke 4. The five major tenets of the Jubilee are: "leaving the land to fallow" or resting the earth so to replenish its resources; forgiving all debtors; freeing the slaves, the prisoners and the oppressed, restoring justice, returning the land and redistributing wealth; and reflecting and celebrating the work of the Holy Spirit as a means of stimulating hope in the world. The five themes of the Jubilee speak to all people, but particularly to the indigenous, especially in terms of replenishing the earth, returning the land and reflecting and celebrating the role of the Spirit.

4. The Franciscan sisters and brothers began to focus on indigenous issues at their FMJPIC annual conference, which took a different approach than those held in the past. As indigenous issues were the priority of the year, the Franciscans decided to host the conference in a mountainous Agta village rather than in a traditional religious retreat house. This was an innovative but challenging task, knowing that if they truly wanted to be in solidarity with the people, they would have to challenge the traditional teaching methods within their own community. They hoped to visit the community and use the time there to learn more about their own Franciscan charisma through the insights and lives of the people. The Franciscan family hoped to learn from the Agta people's reverence for mother earth, prayerful, sacred and simplistic lifestyles and holistic conception of the human person. They understood that if they were to be true to their commitment to learning from the indigenous, it would be necessary to reflect in the midst of them. Also, they had to actively involve the Agta community in their reflections so they would not only be the objects of the reflection, but participants as well.

5. As can be expected, the organization of this conference was dramatically different from those held in previous years. On average, FMJPIC spends 20,000 pesos per conference for the rental of a religious retreat house. Often the participants at the conferences come from the meetings personally renewed and newly aware, but with little tangible or lasting evidence to show for their gathering. The Agta conference challenged this trend and provided new opportunities for creating more lasting outcomes. With the 20,000 pesos normally spent on a retreat house, the Franciscans decided to make a donation to the Agta people so that they could construct a building. The conference coordinators met with the community leaders, explained that they needed a meeting place for their conference and that they would provide money and materials for the community to construct a building that would serve the needs of the community after the conference. The purpose, location and size of the building were left completely to the village. After careful consideration, the Agta people decided that they would build a learning/community centre designed to be conducive to the learning styles of their people. The structure was built in just two weeks because the entire village was involved in its construction.

6. Once the centre was built, the Franciscans travelled to the Agta village. Each Franciscan stayed with a family, but all meals, meetings and reflections were held in the new centre. The brothers and sisters opened dialogue with the community by sharing all of their meals with them. They also invited community members to become full participants in the conference. Hosting all meals, meetings, activities and reflections in Tagalog - the primary language of the Philippines - facilitated this process.

7. The Agta participation was crucial to the conference's success. They shared their life experiences and challenged the Franciscans to be true to the charisma that guides them. The Agta people had a profound impact on the group-sharing process. During this part of the conference, each Franciscan was asked to read a written statement that articulated his faith experience and his experiences with the indigenous. The Agta participants were asked to listen to these testimonies, and then to challenge and affirm the presenters. The Agta participants pointed out all inconsistencies in the Franciscan reflections and pushed them to be more true to their statements and their Franciscan charisma.

8. The Agta conference proved to be extremely successful. Not only were the Franciscans able to learn, pray and reflect more on the lived experience of the indigenous Filipino populations, but it also was able to leave a tangible mark behind. The Franciscans fully immersed themselves in the indigenous community, and allowed themselves to become the objects of indigenous teaching. It was a time for true solidarity as both communities, the Agta people and the Franciscans, came out of the experience having given and receiving something. The Franciscans came out with a new consciousness and a new commitment to their charisma, and the Agta community came out of it with a new learning/community centre.

9. Discussions within the international community about the right to development and the rights of indigenous people can often cause sparks, heat and lots of smoke. Lost in some of the arguments are the deepest needs of some people and the good intentions of others to learn and to be helpful. Is it realistic to expect that the needs of two completely different groups can complement and enhance each other? If one benefits we presume that the other must pay the price. How can two very different groups benefit from the same programme? Some Franciscan brothers and sisters in the Philippines recently profited from a programme that they shared with the Agta people who live in a mountainous region of Luzon. With consultation, planning and creativity the Franciscans and the Agta both benefited from a conference that was economical, enriching, and that provided them with long-term practical results.